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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the sex group stereotypes of elementary and high school-age youths. A total of 60 males and 60 females evaluated "boys" and "girls" on a semantic differential-type scale. The results indicated that younger members of both sexes were more positive about their own sex and more negative about the opposite sex than were their older counterparts. In addition, adolescent males, but not adolescent females, adopted more favorable evaluations of the opposite sex over their own sex group. Possible explanations are offered to account for these findings. (Author)

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Mapping Sex Group Stereotypes of Elementary and High School Students

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By the age of four, children have dichotomized the world into females and males and are deeply concerned with discerning boy-girl differences (Kagan, 1964). Dividing parents, siblings and peers into either male or female categories, however, is not the end of the children's sex group differentiation. Instead, it is only the beginning of what appears to be a life-long process. Once children have determined their own sex group they become intensely committed to molding their behavior in concordance with cultural standards that seem to be transmitted to children in every arena of life (e.g. home, school, church and job) (Kagan, 1964). What is most interesting, however, is that while sex group stereotypes seem to be readily adopted early in children's lives, their evaluation of these sex groups are not static but seem to be in a general state of flux. For instance, in a recent study by Parish and Bryant (1976) it was reported that females' attitudes toward "girls" varied according to age (i.e., grade). More specifically, first and second grade girls evaluated their sex group "girls" significantly more positively than girls from grades three through six.

In light of the findings by Parish and Bryant (1976), the present study sought to examine first through twelfth grade males' and females' evaluations of their own sex and of the opposite sex.

Method

Subjects

A total of 60 males and 60 females were drawn from the first through twelfth grades of a small midwestern school system. These youths ranged from 6 to 19 years of age. The sixty males consisted of 15 subjects which had been randomly selected from each of the following grade groups: grades 1-3, 4-6, 7-9, and 10-12. In like manner, the sixty females were randomly selected so that 15 subjects were from each of the grade groups noted above for males.

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Procedure

All subjects were asked to respond to two evaluative semantic differential-type attitude scales. Scale A requested that the subjects rate "girls" while scale B requested that they rate "boys". Both target groups (i.e., boys and girls) were evaluated along 8 bipolar divisions: good-bad, beautiful-ugly, sweet-sour, clean-dirty, kind-cruel, nice-awful, honest-dishonest, and fair-unfair. Between each of these bipolar adjectives there was a seven point scale. Thus, scores ranged from 1 (positive word) to 7 (negative words). Since there were a total of 8 bipolar divisions, each child's total score had a possible range from 8 (very positive attitude) to 56 (very negative attitude) toward the sex group in question. This particular rating scale, which was originally developed by Osgood (1952), has been successfully used before to assess children's attitudes toward groups of people (Parish & Bryant, 1976; Parish, Lambert & Shirazi, 1976). In an earlier study by Parish and Bryant (1976), with first through sixth grade girls, it was reported that their evaluations of boys and girls over a one-day interval were found to have adequate test-retest reliabilities (.80 & .84, respectively).

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Results

Groups (i.e., grades 1-3, 4-6, 7-9, 10-12) X Sex of Respondent X Sex of Target were analyzed in a 4 X 2 X 2 analysis of variance using a repeated measures

design. There was significant main effects for group $F\ (3, 544) = 4.71$, $p < .01$; sex of respondent $F\ (1, 544) = 12.19$, $p < .001$; and sex of target $F\ (1, 544) = 38.72$, $p < .001$). While there was no significant interaction effect for group X sex of respondent ($F\ [3.544] = 1.21$, $p > .05$) or for group X sex of target ($F\ [3, 544] = 1.02$, $p > .05$), there were significant interaction effects between sex of respondent X sex of target ($F\ [1, 544] = 14.44$, $p < .001$) and between group Y sex of respondent X sex of target ($F\ [3, 544] = 15.17$, $p < .001$).

A series of Newman-Keuls tests were performed to determine whether the means of the various groups were significantly different from one another. See Graph 1 which depicts how females and males evaluate both sexes.

Regarding age effects, males' evaluations of boys become progressively more negative with age ($\bar{X}_1 = 15.50 < \bar{X}_2 = 20.91 < \bar{X}_3 = 26.46 < \bar{X}_4 = 26.97$) while their evaluations of females were found to be significantly more positive in group 3 ($\bar{X}_3 = 20.00$) and group 4 ($\bar{X}_4 = 20.26$) than in group 1 ($\bar{X}_1 = 21.31$). Females' evaluations of girls were significantly more positive in group 1 ($\bar{X}_1 = 15.85$), group 2 ($\bar{X}_2 = 17.60$) and group 3 ($\bar{X}_3 = 22.74$) than in group 4 ($\bar{X}_4 = 24.86$). Interestingly, females' evaluations of girls in group 1 were also significantly more positive than females' evaluations of girls in group 3.

Noteworthy sex of target effects were also demonstrated. More specifically, groups 1, 3, and 4 males evaluated boys in a significantly different fashion than they evaluated girls. For males in group 1 evaluations of boys ($\bar{X}_1 = 15.50$) were significantly more positive than their evaluations of girls ($\bar{X}_1 = 21.31$). In contrast, the males in groups 3 and 4 evaluated girls ($\bar{X}_3 = 20.00$, $\bar{X}_4 = 20.26$, respectively) significantly more positively than boys ($\bar{X}_3 = 26.46$, $\bar{X}_4 = 26.80$, respectively).

Regarding females in groups 1, 2, 3, and 4, their evaluations of boys differed significantly from their evaluations of girls. In each comparison females evaluated girls ($\bar{X}_1 = 15.85$, $\bar{X}_2 = 17.60$, $\bar{X}_3 = 22.74$, $\bar{X}_4 = 24.86$) significantly more favorably than they evaluated boys ($\bar{X}_1 = 29.62$, $\bar{X}_2 = 32.03$, $\bar{X}_3 = 26.46$, $\bar{X}_4 = 26.80$).

The sex of respondent effects that were found in this study were that boys were evaluated in a significantly different manner by males and females in groups 1, 2, and 3 but not in group 4. More specifically, boys were evaluated more positively by males in groups 1 ($\bar{X}_1 = 15.50$) and 2 ($\bar{X}_2 = 20.49$ than by females in groups 1 ($\bar{X}_1 = 29.62$) and 2 ($\bar{X}_2 = 32.03$). Females in group 3, however, evaluated boys ($\bar{X}_3 = 24.86$) significantly more positively than males in group 3 ($\bar{X}_3 = 26.46$). Furthermore, girls were evaluated in a significantly different manner by males and females in groups 1, 2, 3, and 4. Girls were evaluated more positively by females in group 1 ($\bar{X}_1 = 15.85$) and group 2 ($\bar{X}_2 = 17.60$) than by males in group 1 ($\bar{X}_1 = 21.31$) and group 2 ($\bar{X}_2 = 20.49$). The males in group 3 ($\bar{X}_3 = 20.00$) and group 4 ($\bar{X}_4 = 20.26$), however, evaluated girls significantly more favorably than females in group 3 ($\bar{X}_3 = 22.74$) and group 4 ($\bar{X}_4 = 24.86$).

The significant sex of respondent X sex of target interaction effects indicate that females evaluated members of the same sex ($\bar{X} = 20.26$) more favorably than members of the opposite sex ($\bar{X} = 28.33$). Males, however, evaluated members of the opposite sex ($\bar{X} = 20.52$) more favorably than members of the same sex ($\bar{X} = 22.46$).

The significant three way interaction effect between groups X sex of respondent X sex of target can be readily seen in Graph 1. Basically, subjects' (both males and females) evaluations of their own sex were initially very positive, but became more negative across groups (i.e. grades). In contrast, subjects' evaluation of the opposite sex were initially rather negative but became more positive across groups.

Discussion

This study seems to have produced some rather noteworthy findings. For instance, younger members of both sexes were more positive in their evaluations of their own sex group and were more negative in their evaluations of the opposite sex group than were their older counterparts. One explanation for these findings

is that younger children tend to perceive things in black/white contrasts (e.g. simple dichotomies) while older children are more capable of dealing with shades of gray (Ginsburg & Opper, 1969). Not only are younger children's cognitive capacities less accomodating than older children's cognitive capacities, but younger children are also undergoing indoctrination into their own sex groups by various individuals in their environment. Thus, male children seek to identify with their fathers, while female children attempt to identify with their mothers (Kagan, 1964). The subsequent result is that for younger children a kind of inclusivity may make members of their own sex "good" while a kind of exclusivity operates to make members of the opposite sex tend to be catagorized as "bad".

At least with regard to the children in the present study, there appears to have been a trend toward becoming more neutral toward both sexes as the children grew older. These findings appear to support Erikson's (1950) suggestion that optimal psychological functioning demands that a person have an identity that incorporates features that are typically associated with both traditional sex roles. More recently, Bem (1975) has supported this view experimentally. She found that people with mixed identities were more flexible than people who had accepted traditional sex-role attitudes for themselves. It could be that adolescents have had sufficient experience and cognitive maturity to accept a more neutral position regarding sex group stereotyping.

Adolescent males, but not adolescent females in this study adopted more favorable evaluations of members of the opposite sex group over their own sex group. Perhaps this finding means that they were not only neutralized but actually became somewhat negative toward their own sex group because of stereotypes currently being transmitted throughout our society which have sensitized them to their own sex group frailties. After all, can males really choose to play out either sex role like females do? Are not males being type cast into rather negative roles like "male chauvinist pigs"? What this finding may mean is that males--more so than females--may need to avoid negative labels and instead emphasize their positive attributes if they wish to overcome this somewhat negative image the adolescent males in this study demonstrated toward their own sex group. In other words, males probably need to think more positively about themselves but hopefully not at the expense of their attitudes toward the members of the opposite sex.

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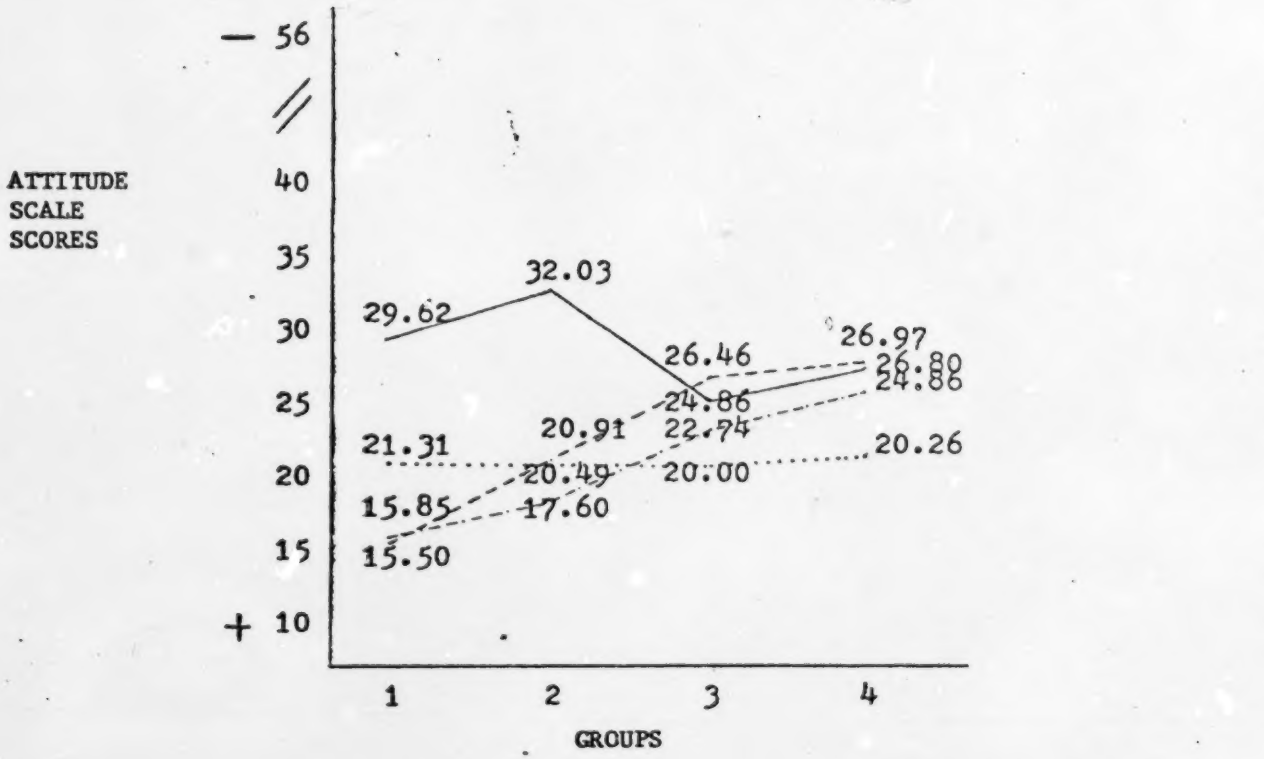
Graph 1

Elementary and High School Students'

Evaluations of "Boys" and "Girls"*



Females' evaluations of "Girls"

Females' evaluations of "boys"

Males' evaluations of "Girls"

Males' evaluations of "Boys"

*The lower the score the more positive the evaluation of the particular sex group